

## The Poet and the Evangelist in Nonnus' *Paraphrase of the Gospel according to John*

*Ipsa quidem, sed non <eadem est>, eademque nec ipsa est*

'It is itself, but not the same, the same and not itself'

Lactantius, *De ave phoenice* 169<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Christian poetry, and Biblical epic in particular, is intensely self-conscious. Both Greek and Latin Christian poets begin or end their compositions, paraphrases and centos with poetological reflections on the value and objectives of their works. The fifth-century *Paraphrase of the Gospel according to John* is an anomaly in this tradition. While Nonnus' mythological epic, the *Dionysiaca*, is heavily self-conscious in that it includes a strong authorial voice as well as an extensive *prooemium* and an interlude, the Christian *Paraphrase* has no *prooemium*, epilogue or interlude, and its narrator never identifies himself. This article examines two passages in the *Paraphrase* where subtle, implicit poetological reflections may be detected, and then explores the reasons why Nonnus may have chosen to deny the *Paraphrase* a clear (meta)literary identity. It argues that Nonnus' poem presents itself as *the* Gospel of John, and that its narrator 'becomes' John the Evangelist in a spiritual exercise which is indebted to Origen's views on that Gospel.

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<sup>1</sup> Text and translation as printed in Roberts (2017) 388. Other translations in this article are my own.

## Introduction: The voice of the Christian poet

The Christian poets of Late Antiquity speak with a loud, and markedly personal, authorial voice.<sup>2</sup> In what is probably one of the earliest extensive Christian poems, Commodian, a third-century poet,<sup>3</sup> speaks of his conversion to Christianity: he was an 'errant' pagan for a long time, but then the Lord shone his light on him – a blessing of such magnitude that the poet's voice will hardly suffice to express his gratitude.<sup>4</sup> In the fourth century Juvencus writes the first extant Biblical epic, a hexametrical 'harmony' of the Gospels titled *Evangeliorum Libri Quattuor*. In his polemical preface to this epic Juvencus declares that, if the poems of Homer and Virgil, 'which interweave the deeds of men of old with falsehoods' (16: *quae veterum gestis hominum mendacia nectunt*), have won 'long-lasting fame' (15: *longam famam*), then his own poem, which proclaims the deeds of Christ and cannot be accused of lying (20: *falsi sine crimine*), will not only survive the final conflagration of the world, but will also save the poet himself from the flames (22: *hoc etenim forsā me subtrahet igni*).<sup>5</sup> Juvencus thus introduces in the Latin Christian tradition two influential themes: the forceful renunciation of mythological, literary fictions,<sup>6</sup> and the poet's *personal* salvation in the afterlife through his

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Nides (1993) 9. Shorrock (2011) 14, who does not speak exclusively of Christian poets, also suggests it is not a coincidence that 'the voice of the poet becomes stronger and louder at the same time that Christianity was establishing itself as the dominant force in the late antique world.'

<sup>3</sup> For this date see Pollmann (2013) 315 with further bibliography and comments on how this early Christian poet asserts his poetic authority.

<sup>4</sup> The poem has two alternative titles: *Carmen apologeticum* and *Carmen de duobus populis*. The poet speaks of his conversion in the preface; see esp. vv. 9-10: *Sed gratias Domino (nec sufficit vox mea tantum / reddere) qui misero vacillanti tandem adluxit!*

<sup>5</sup> There is rich commentary on Juvencus' preface in Green (2006) 15-23. Cf. Consolino (2005) 464-73, Pollmann (2013) 317-19, and, most recently, McBrine (2017) 27-33.

<sup>6</sup> One century after Juvencus, Sedulius begins his *Carmen Paschale* with a preface rejecting the *figmenta* (v. 17) and *mendacia* (v. 22) of the pagan poets; see Green (2006) 162-4, and McBrine (2017)

poetic work.<sup>7</sup> The epilogue of Juvencus' epic again draws attention to the poet himself and the importance of his endeavour: his own mind (802: *mea mens*) has been empowered, the grace of Christ shines upon him (803: *lucet mihi*), and in his own verses (804: *versibus ut nostris*) the divine law happily takes on 'the earthly ornaments of language' (805: *ornamenta ... terrestria linguae*).

Later Christian poets continue to be personally involved in their poetry,<sup>8</sup> in a way that both defies modern distinctions between author and narrator,<sup>9</sup> and highlights the poems' status as written texts, addressed by the historical author to the reader. Para-textual devices, such as prefaces and epilogues, play a cardinal role in this development,<sup>10</sup> but are far from being the only places in which poets step inside their poems. Sedulius interjects exclamations, apostrophes, and rhetorical questions throughout his epic on Christ, the *Carmen Paschale*,

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103-7. For further examples see Paulinus, *Carm.* 10.19-46, discussed by Shorrock (2011) 15-20, Proba's cento, vv. 13-17, with commentary in Schottenius Cullhed (2015) 113-29, and Avitus' prose epistle which prefaces his *De spiritalis historiae gestis*, briefly discussed by Pollmann (2001) 70, and *ead.* (2017) 62-4. On the Platonic background of this renunciation of poetic fictions and how Christian poetry managed to reinvent itself against this challenge see Mastrangelo (2017).

<sup>7</sup> See Palmer (1989) 15-16 on the Christian poets' expectation that their glorification of God will guarantee their personal salvation, which both recalls and one-ups classical Roman poets' hopes for immortal fame through the survival of their work.

<sup>8</sup> See Pollmann (2013) 316, and *ead.* (2017) 3. For Prudentius as a character inside his own poems see Malamud (1989) 44.

<sup>9</sup> Whitmarsh (2013) rightly points out that the author - narrator divide, which is so central to modern criticism, runs against the reading instincts and habits of ancient audiences.

<sup>10</sup> For the importance of prefaces (sometimes in a different meter or in prose) see Pollmann (2001) 66-7, and, more extensively, Pelttari (2014) 45-72. For the history of prose prefaces to poems see Pavlovskis (1967), and on Roman paratextuality in general Jansen (2014).

and likes to exhort his audience using the first person plural.<sup>11</sup> Proba's Virgilian cento features an interlude, which separates the Old from the New Testament section, and in which the poet announces, in the first person singular, that she will now 'set in motion a greater work' (334: *maius opus moveo*).<sup>12</sup> Proba's preface, in fact, includes a striking *sphragis*-verse in which the poet names herself: she asks God to receive 'this sacred song' (9: *sacrum ... carmen*) and open up her heart, 'so that I, Proba the prophetess/poet, may relate all mysteries' (12: *arcana ut possim vatis Proba cuncta referre*).<sup>13</sup> Other Christian poets also name themselves in their verses, and indeed use creative means to do so. Commodian, mentioned above, ends the second, final Book of his *Instructiones* with a poem whose initial letters, when read from bottom to top, yield the *sphragis Commodianus mendicus Christi*. According to Malamud, the last verse of Prudentius' *Hamartigenia* conceals an anagram that refers to the poet's name, Aurelius Prudentius Clemens: the final four words, *poena levis clementer adurat*, can be

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<sup>11</sup> See Roberts (1985) 179-80. Cf. Springer (1988) 90-1 on how Sedulius (like many other Christian poets although perhaps with more intensity) frequently interrupts the narration by bursting into ecstatic hymns or heated tirades against his characters. For similar techniques in the *Alethia* of Claudius Marius Victorius see Kuhn-Treichel (2016) 72-88.

<sup>12</sup> On internal proems in general see the classic study by Conte (1984) 121-33. For another Christian poem featuring an internal proem see the *Carmen adversus Marcionitas* 5.1-18, where the poet offers a summary of his work by presenting each Book as the subject and agent of the narrative it contains (e.g., v. 16: *hic quintus ... resolvit*); cf. Pollmann (2013) 322-3 and *ead.* (2017) 229-30. Interestingly, the *periochae* that summarise each Book of the *Dionysiaca*, and which were probably written by Nonnus himself, adopt the same strategy. For Nonnus as the author of the *periochae* see Zuenelli (2016).

<sup>13</sup> This verse can also be constructed with the *vatis* as a genitive dependent on *arcana*, meaning, 'so that I, Proba, may relate all the mysteries of the prophet/poet [i.e. Virgil]'; see Fassina – Lucarini (2015) n. *ad loc.* For the various ways in which this verse has been interpreted see the overview of Schottenius Cullhed (2015) 18-19, esp. n. 2. Much later, in the sixth century, Venantius Fortunatus names himself at the end of two of the four Books of his *Life of Martin* (2.482 and 4.595).

rearranged to read *Aurelio Prudente se clamante*; if we include the *clementer* of the original text, we have here all three of the poet's names.<sup>14</sup> Obviously, the presence of *sphragides* within anagrams or acrostics reinforces the very textual nature of these poems: they are clearly meant to be read (not heard) and examined carefully, with the reader scanning the letters and pages in search of hidden clues.

It has been argued that, whereas in the Latin West the combination of classical literary forms and Christian themes needed some qualification and justification, in the Greek East there was a stronger sense of continuity between pagan and Christian literature (and culture),<sup>15</sup> which explains the lack of a noisy rejection of poetic fictions in Greek Christian poetry. This might be true in broad terms, but, as Shorrock warns, we should not be beguiled into thinking that the role of classical poetic forms was entirely unproblematic for Greek Christian poets.<sup>16</sup> In his long, autobiographical poem, Gregory of Nazianzus (second half of the fourth century) clarifies that his reason for wanting to study classical authors as a young man was so that he could put these 'bastard letters' into the service of the genuine, Christian

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<sup>14</sup> See Malamud (1989) 44-6, with criticism in Cameron (1995), who, however, concedes that 'it is certainly intriguing that original text and anagram together come so close to all three of the poet's names.' At any rate, the final clause, *me poena levis clementer adurat*, 'may a light punishment burn me leniently', is obviously self-referential and returns us to the theme of the poet's personal salvation in the afterlife in return for his glorification of God.

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Markus (1990) 30-1 on the 'lack of confidence among the Christian elite in the West', their relative isolation, and their anxieties about traditional literary culture versus the 'long period of cultural assimilation' in the East. Hose (2004) 33, on the other hand, sees the relative lack of metaliterary reflection in Greek Christian poets as an indication that their poetry derives from, and is only relevant for, the school context; he does not, however, consider Gregory.

<sup>16</sup> See Shorrock (2011) 32-3.

ones.<sup>17</sup> In another poem, titled Εἰς τὰ ἔμμετρα, Gregory offers a polemical defence of writing poetry on theological topics: this includes both an implied competition between classical and Christian literature ('I cannot allow that the outsiders be superior to us in letters'<sup>18</sup>) and an explicit didacticism (poetry sweetens the bitterness of the Commandments and makes the path of virtue more palatable to the young). Modern scholars have argued that Gregory feels he needs to make the case for Christian poetry because a number of heretics had used poetry to spread their misguided beliefs,<sup>19</sup> and / or because in the ecclesiastical milieu of Constantinople the validity of Christian verse in general and Biblical paraphrase in particular (which Gregory had also composed)<sup>20</sup> was not yet undisputed and indeed was to come under fierce attack by Nilus of Ancyra (late fourth – early fifth century).<sup>21</sup> Whatever his motivation,

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<sup>17</sup> *De vita sua* (II.1.11 = PG 37.1037) 112-13: καὶ γὰρ ἐζήτουν λόγους / δοῦναι βοηθοὺς τοὺς νόθους τοῖς γνησίοις. For an illuminating discussion of Gregory's attitude towards classical poetry (including a brief analysis of the two poems mentioned here) see Demoen (1993).

<sup>18</sup> II.1.39 = PG 37.1329-38, vv. 48-9: οὐδ' ἐν λόγοις / πλέον δίδωμι τοὺς ξένους ἡμῶν ἔχειν. On this poem see Milovanovic-Barham (1997), and McGuckin (2006).

<sup>19</sup> Arius, the arch-heretic, and Apollinaris, who was condemned in 381, both composed poetry; see Simelidis (2009) 27.

<sup>20</sup> See poems I.1.13-27 (PG 37.475-506). Note that in the last poem, I.1.27, Gregory places himself as a character inside the Gospel parables, e.g., asking to join in the wedding celebration of Mt 22:1-14 (vv. 44-5).

<sup>21</sup> In his *ep.* 2.49 (PG 79.220-21) Nilus damns not only the poetry of Apollinaris specifically, but also the practice of setting the Bible into verse *tout court*, such an enterprise is condemned as infantile and an insult to God. The fifth-century Church historian Socrates (3.16) dismissed the Biblical paraphrases of the two Apollinarii as useless: he thinks that readers are better off reading the original classics. On Nilus' letter in relation to Gregory's poetry see Simelidis (2009) 27-9. Demoen (1993) 252 concludes that some in Gregory's immediate environment would not have been convinced of the value of classical

Gregory-the-poet is as self-referential as the Latin poets mentioned in the paragraphs above, and, like them, he both renounces the staple topics of profane poetry,<sup>22</sup> and encourages us to identify the narrator of his poems with the historical author behind them, occasionally even ‘sealing’ his verses with his own name,<sup>23</sup> including within acrostics.<sup>24</sup>

While Gregory might be unique in the degree of meta-literary reflection with which he endows his poetry, other Greek-speaking Christian poets seem to be just as personally involved in their poems. At 343 lines and dating from the early or mid fourth century,<sup>25</sup> the *Vision of Dorotheus* (P. Bodmer 29) is the earliest extensive Christian poem written in Greek that has (partly) survived. This hexameter composition bears the title Ὁρασις Δωροθέου and narrates in the first person a visit to heaven (imagined as a palace) by an imperial guard. While in heaven, the poet-narrator experiences a (Hesiodically inflected) poetic investiture (vv. 170-7),<sup>26</sup> when Gabriel-Jesus places χαρίεσσαν ἀοιδίην (v. 173) in his heart; this, it is implied, allows him to ‘sing’ the present poem. He then undergoes a transformation, during which he becomes a stronger, braver, and more virtuous version of himself, and decides to

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poetic forms, forcing him to ‘engage in a sort of continual give-and-take.’ For an emphasis on the milieu of Constantinople (as opposed to Egypt) see Agosti (2001) 92-4, and *id.* (2002) 75.

<sup>22</sup> See II.1.34a.71-8 (*PG* 37.1312-13), cited and briefly discussed in Agosti (2010) 22. Here the poet announces that he will glorify God and not Troy, Argo, Heracles etc; his list includes mythological topics as well as didactic (stones and the courses of the stars) and amatory ones.

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., II.1.10.35-6, where Gregory’s name and fatherland (Cappadocia) appear in the last two verses of the poem; cf. II.1.17.65-6 and II.1.92.11-12 (name in the final lines), and II.1.19.25-6 (name and birthplace). For commentary on these *sphragides* see Simelidis (2009) 150-2.

<sup>24</sup> For acrostics which spell Gregory’s name see I.2.31 (*PG* 37.910), I.2.33 (*PG* 37.928), and II.1.14 (*PG* 37.1244).

<sup>25</sup> For the mid fourth century date see Agosti (2015).

<sup>26</sup> See Agosti (2002) 103-105, who provides a comprehensive and insightful introduction to the Christian Bodmer poems.

adopt the name Andreas (v. 226). Indeed, he is called Andreas by the Lord in v. 267, but then, when other characters in the vision see him and he appears to them taller than usual and bright as the sun, they ask ἦ τοῖός ἐστιν ὁ Κυντιάδης Δωρόθεος; (v. 300: 'Is that really Dorotheus, the son of Quintus?'). When the vision ends, the poet-narrator rises up and says that the Lord has laid songs of various kinds in his heart (vv. 340-1). The poem ends here, which the papyrus indicates with a subscription that reads τέλος τῆς ὁράσεως. Δωροθέου Κυίντου ποιητοῦ.<sup>27</sup> It is clear that the text presents itself as the true experience of a real person called Dorotheus. We might like to keep the narrator of this 'fictional autobiography' separate from the poet,<sup>28</sup> but Dorotheus-the-poet has 'sealed' the narrator with his own name,<sup>29</sup> and an ancient audience would be, in any way, inclined to hear the narrating 'I' as the voice of the real-life author.

From the first half of the fifth century we have three large-scale Biblical epics: Nonnus' *Paraphrase of the Gospel according to John* (henceforth, *Paraphrase*), the *Metaphrasis Psalmorum*, and the *Homeric Centos* that come down to us under the name of the Empress Eudocia. The apocryphal *Metaphrasis Psalmorum*, attributed to Apollinaris, begins with a *protheoria* in which the authorial voice dedicates the poem to his spiritual father, Marcian, who had encouraged him to undertake the task of restoring the metrical grace of the Old Testament Psalms – the grace that was lost in the prose translation commissioned by Ptolemy (v. 21).<sup>30</sup> The very first word of the epic is an emphatic, first person verb, ἔλπομαι,

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<sup>27</sup> The genitive ποιητοῦ can be attached to either Dorotheus or Quintus. Even in the latter case, it is very unlikely that this 'Quintus the poet' would be Quintus of Smyrna.

<sup>28</sup> For the concept of 'fictional autobiography' see Whitmarsh (2013).

<sup>29</sup> For the *sphragis* of Dorotheus appearing in some of the other Bodmer poems, which must be attributed to the same poet, see Agosti (2002) 82.

<sup>30</sup> An edition and study of this poem is under way by Andrew Faulkner. For insightful comments on the *protheoria* see Agosti (2001) 87-92, and Faulkner (2014) 201-6.



which blurs the boundaries between poet and narrator, and immediately sets forth the poet's agenda. Apart from a literary programme (to celebrate God in the Ionian language, v. 107, and restore the metrical grace of the Psalms), the *protheoria* also offers information on the poet and his personal circumstances: in v. 3 he claims he is blind (τυφλὸς γεγάως) but bears a different light (φάος ἄλλο),<sup>31</sup> while in vv. 36-43, within a reported speech by Marcian, the poet informs us that he is originally from Egypt, but at some point moved to Constantinople, where Marcian offered him patronage. The *protheoria* closes with a strong, first person claim that the poet has fulfilled Marcian's wishes, having the ever-living Christ as his assistant in song (vv. 109-10: Μαρκιανὸς ποθέεσκεν, ἐγὼ δὲ οἱ ἥνυσσα βουλήν / Χριστὸν αἰεὶ ζῶντα λαχὼν ἐπαρωγὸν ἀοιδῆς).<sup>32</sup>

In the long *apologia* which must have stood at the beginning of Eudocia's *Homeric Centos* (a composition which might or might not be what is nowadays referred to as the First

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<sup>31</sup> As Agosti (2001) 88 notes, this claim makes the poet into a second Homer, and is part of his (and his poem's) literary self-presentation. For a contemporary Christian poet offering concrete, but suspicious, biographical information in a prologue see Prudentius' *praefatio* (a poem introducing his entire poetic oeuvre), which outlines the poet's *curriculum vitae* up until the moment he begins to write poetry, at the age of 57. For a discussion of this poem in terms of programmatic fiction see Coşkun (2003) 215-25. For the *praefatio* as recasting Horatian lyric and erotic motifs in moral terms see O'Daly (2016) 222-4.

<sup>32</sup> Shorrock (2011) 32-3 highlights the importance of invoking Christ and not the Muses for inspiration and assistance when composing poetry (without referring to this epic), and draws attention to a book-epigram by a certain Marinus, in which the poet (or scribe) calls upon Christ for inspiration: *Anth. Pal.* 1.23.3-4: δμῶι τεῷ, τῷ τήνδε βιβλον γράψαντι Μαρίνῳ, / δὸς χάριν εὐεπίης καὶ λογικῆς σοφίης. Note that the same Marinus also penned the very similar *Anth. Pal.* 1.28, in which he again calls upon Christ, names himself, and refers to the volume he has written or copied (v. 3: ὃς τόδε τεύχος ἔγραψεν ἑαῖς χεῖρεσσι Μαρῖνος). Waltz (1960) 22 n. 1 and 23 n. 1 argues that the two epigrams must have originally stood at the beginning and end of the same volume. On these epigrams and their 'Christianisation' of inspiration cf. Agosti (2015b) 205-6.

Redaction) the poet pre-empts criticism of her poem, and details the history of its composition.<sup>33</sup> This book (deictic, τήνδε ... βίβλον in v. 2) was first put together by Patricius,<sup>34</sup> but it had considerable imperfections and omissions, which Eudocia set out respectively to correct and fill in. Again, the poet merges with the narrator, as Eudocia describes her process of composition (e.g., vv. 9-10: ἀλλ' ἐγὼ ... σελίδας ἱερὰς μετὰ χεῖρα λαβοῦσα) and even draws attention to her female gender (v. 35: κάμοί, καὶ θηλυτέρη περ ἐούση). Even after the *apologia*, the poet-narrator of this poem inserts herself (or himself, if the verses do go back to Patricius) in the story and reveals her/his emotions and thoughts on the events s/he narrates – a practice well attested in Latin Biblical epic.<sup>35</sup>

#### Metaliterary hints in Nonnus' *Paraphrase*

Nonnus of Panopolis does not fit in the pattern outlined above, and his Christian epic, the *Paraphrase*, appears to be an anomaly among large-scale, ambitious Biblical epics. This poem shows no (obvious) signs of poetic self-consciousness. It has no *prooemium*,<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> For an introduction to the *Homeric Centos* with emphasis on the *apologia* see Agosti (2001) 74-85. For the contested authorship and the attribution of the First Redaction to Eudocia see Schembra (2007) cxxxiii–cxlii.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. the deictics τήνδε βίβλον and τόδε τεῦχος in the two epigrams by Marinus cited above, n. 32.

<sup>35</sup> See Kuhn-Treichel (2017) on the centoist's 'involved narrating'.

<sup>36</sup> See De Stefani (2016) 679-80 for the history of the hypothesis that the poem was originally prefaced by a, now lost, prologue, perhaps one written in another metre and in which Nonnus would have dedicated his composition to one Ammonius, to whom the work was later attributed. I agree with De Stefani that this hypothesis seems largely implausible, not least because, as one of the anonymous reviewers for *CCJ* points out to me, separate prologues in different metres from the main poem are indeed known in Greek Late Antiquity, but are all later than Nonnus: Paul the Silentiary, John of Gaza, and Christodorus, for whom a lost iambic prologue has also been posited – see Whitby (2018) 284-5– all date from the sixth century.

epilogue, or interlude, and its narrator never speaks about himself or allows us in any way to identify him.<sup>37</sup> This is all the more striking, because Nonnus' strategy in his mythological *Dionysiaca* is the exact opposite of the reticence he adopts in the *Paraphrase*. His 48-Book, secular epic is, indeed, heavily self-conscious. It begins with an extensive *prooemium*, in which the poet-narrator describes his own investiture by the Muses with Bacchic accoutrements (1.11: ἄξατέ μοι νάρθηκα, ... Μοῦσαι), catalogues his subject matter,<sup>38</sup> and sets forth his aesthetic programme of *poikilia* (1.15: ποικίλον ὕμνον ἀράσσω).<sup>39</sup> Apart from the *prooemium* there is also an interlude in the middle of the epic, in Book 25, where the poet-narrator proclaims his ambition to surpass other poets, 'both old and new' (25.27: νέοισι καὶ ἀρχεγόνοισιν ἐρίζων).<sup>40</sup> Later on in the same Book, after a direct invocation of Homer (25.253-63),<sup>41</sup> he asks the Muse to transport him again to the battlefield (25.264: ἀλλὰ θεά με

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<sup>37</sup> This fact has also allowed the *Paraphrase* to be mis-attributed, by Sherry (1996), to a Pseudo-Nonnus; for the history of this question and the current consensus in favour of Nonnus' authorship see Shorrock (2011) 51, and Accorinti (2016), both with further bibliography. My argument here will be that the poet's anonymity is programmed; for another poet whose anonymity has recently been examined as intentional and productive, but in an entirely different context, see Geue's (2017) study of Juvenal.

<sup>38</sup> The poet juxtaposes (in catalogue form) Proteus' successive metamorphoses to the various episodes he will include in his song (1.17-33); note the first person verbs: μέλπω, ὑμνήσω, αἰείσω, μνήσομαι etc.

<sup>39</sup> The bibliography on Nonnus' *poikilia* is considerable; the classic and most extensive study is by Fauth (1981) esp. 35-8 on the prologue.

<sup>40</sup> For the poetological import of this verse as well as parallels in Christian epigrams see Agosti (2004) *ad loc.*

<sup>41</sup> Homer is addressed as παμφαῆς υἱὲ Μέλητος in v. 253; the narrator later says that he will do battle, ἔμπνοον ἔγχος ἔχοντα καὶ ἀσπίδα πατρὸς Ὀμήρου (265). Homer is also named in 1.37 and 25.8. Pindar is named in 25.21, while Hesiod is indicated by his birthplace in 13.75-6. For late antique epic poets being increasingly willing to name their poetic predecessors see, most recently, Kaufmann (2017) 308-

κόμιζε τὸ δεύτερον ἐς μῶθον Ἰνδῶν), where he expects to go on killing Dionysus' Indian enemies (25.270: ὄφρα **κατακτείνω** νοερῷ δορί λείψανον Ἰνδῶν).<sup>42</sup> The narrator of the *Dionysiaca* thus enters the world of his characters and participates in their actions in what could be taken as a strong version of metalepsis.<sup>43</sup> He also encourages us to identify him with the real-life author of the poem by occasionally reminding us of his Egyptian origin. In the *prooemium*, he privileges the Egyptian Proteus as his model, and refers to Pharos as a 'neighbouring island' (1.13: Φάρω παρὰ γείτονι νήσῳ).<sup>44</sup> This connection of the poet-narrator with Egypt also crops up, unexpectedly, in a non-poetological passage. When the narrator of the *Dionysiaca* speaks of the (fictitious) Indian hippopotamus, he says that this animal also

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9. Cf. Shorrock (2011) 39, who notes that 'in late antiquity the practice of Classical "name-dropping" becomes almost *de rigueur*.'

<sup>42</sup> Cf. earlier in the same Book, 25.22, again in the voice of the narrator: ἀλλὰ πάλιν κτείνωμεν Ἐρυθραίων γένος Ἰνδῶν.

<sup>43</sup> Whitmarsh (2013b) 5-6 distinguishes between strong and weak versions of metalepsis or 'frame-breaking', and argues that the Homeric apostrophes represent a weak version, as, 'It would come as quite a surprise – both to Patroclus and to the audience – if he [Homer] manifested himself on the battlefield.' Nonnus claims here he is on the battlefield, although, of course, none of his characters ever notices. Schmitz (2005) 210-11 highlights the active role of the narrator in the poem, but considers this narrator a 'textual figure', entirely separate from the historical author.

<sup>44</sup> On the precise wording and correct interpretation of this verse see Gigli Piccardi (1993). *Anth. Pal.* 9.198 (Νόννος ἐγώ· Πανὸς μὲν ἐμὴ πόλις, ἐν Φαρίῃ δὲ / ἔγχρῃ φωνήεντι γονὰς ἤμησα Γιγάντων), which may have been composed by Nonnus as a book epigram to accompany one or both of his epics, apparently uses the island of Pharos to indicate Alexandria. The most recent analysis of this epigram, by Castelli (2017), ties it more closely to the *Dionysiaca* rather than the *Paraphrase*, and is inconclusive regarding its authorship.

lives in his own Nile (26.238: οἶος ἔμοῦ Νεῖλοιο), again reminding his readers of the real-life, Egyptian author who is never far away from the story he is telling.<sup>45</sup>

Arguably, Nonnus made a very deliberate choice *not* to reveal his identity or offer any poetological reflection in the *Paraphrase*, but why is this so? The only answer that has been offered thus far, by Schmitz, is that the poet-narrator of the *Dionysiaca* felt confident in polemically staking his ground against his classical models, poets ‘both old and new’, whereas the one of the *Paraphrase* would have found it unthinkable to challenge his Biblical model: John the Evangelist himself.<sup>46</sup> It is obviously true that no Christian poet would pit him/herself against the Bible, but, as the discussion above suggests, Christian poets can and do speak about themselves and their poems, assuming a variety of different poses, some of which would have been available to the poet of the *Paraphrase*. A renunciation of the themes and motifs of profane poetry, as found in many Latin poets and in Gregory of Nazianzus,<sup>47</sup> would have been unlikely here given the (probably contemporaneous) composition of the *Dionysiaca*,<sup>48</sup> but other poetological concerns could have been addressed: the poet could have explained what motivated him to undertake the task of setting John’s Gospel into

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<sup>45</sup> Gigli Piccardi (1998) 76 underlines the importance of this statement, given that the poem’s action does not take place in Egypt and the poet is thus ‘constrained’ in the kind of Egyptian references he can weave into his poem. For the many ways in which the narrator of the *Dionysiaca* makes his presence felt in the poem see, most recently, Geisz (2018) 65-120, who, however, insists on the distinction between historical author, narrator, and implied author.

<sup>46</sup> See Schmitz (2005) 215.

<sup>47</sup> For Gregory see above, n. 22. Agosti (2001) 92-4, and *id.* (2002) 75 argues that such protestations would have been entirely unnecessary in an Egyptian milieu, where Biblical poetry enjoyed a more consolidated tradition, as evidenced by the Bodmer poems.

<sup>48</sup> For arguments in favour of the contemporaneous composition of the two epics see Shorrock (2011) 50-1 with further bibliography.

hexameters,<sup>49</sup> or why he chose this Gospel in particular.<sup>50</sup> A defence of Nonnus' aesthetic programme of *poikilia* (as set out in the *Dionysiaca*) would have also been supremely appropriate: the whole enterprise of paraphrasing depends, after all, on the art of variation – saying the same thing in different words.<sup>51</sup>

An attempt to discern an implicit meta-poetic relationship between the *Paraphrase* and the *Dionysiaca* has recently been made by Spanoudakis,<sup>52</sup> who noticed that the end of Nonnus' mythological epic and the beginning of his Christian one are linked together by a 'bridge'. The *Dionysiaca* ends with the formal reception of Dionysus, the θεὸς ἀμπελόεις (48.974) in Olympus, where he shares a feast with his father Zeus and is seated next to Apollo (in the last verse of the epic, 48.978, σύνθρονος Ἀπόλλωνι).<sup>53</sup> These final lines of the *Dionysiaca* invite a comparison with the beginning of the *Paraphrase*, where Christ, the θεὸς . . . λόγος (1.5), is 'indivisible from the Father, seated on the same throne in the boundless abode' (1.4:

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<sup>49</sup> Whitby (2016) 216 characteristically asks, 'Why did the ever-ingenious author of the *Dionysiaca* choose to constrain his bursting versatility within the confines of the biblical text? ... was Nonnus attracted by the challenge of accommodating to this demanding exercise his exuberant, yet rigorous, style?'

<sup>50</sup> Instead, Nonnus leaves modern critics to do this work for him; see Franchi (2016) 242-8 on John being thought of, already in the third century, as the 'spiritual Gospel'. It was also considered the most ecumenical. In his poem on the genuine books of the Scripture, Gregory of Nazianzus says that Matthew wrote for the Hebrews, Mark for the Romans, Luke for the Greeks, but John, 'the great herald', wrote for everybody (I.1.12 = PG 37.474, v. 33): πᾶσι δ' Ἰωάννης, κήρυξ μέγας, οὐρανοφοίτης.

<sup>51</sup> On the connections between Biblical paraphrases and the paraphrase as a rhetorical exercise employed to teach stylistic variety (*poikilia*), see Roberts (1985) esp. 10-11, with references to Theon 62.10-24 and 64.25.

<sup>52</sup> See Spanoudakis (2016) 622.

<sup>53</sup> For the importance of commensality in the *Dionysiaca* and its links with the Eucharist and *agape* feasts see Shorrock (2011) 107-9.

πατὴρ ἔην ἀμέριστος, ἀτέρμονι **σύνθρονος** ἔδρῃ).<sup>54</sup> According to Spanoudakis, this ‘bridge’ shows Dionysus as an inferior god compared to Christ, and presents the *Paraphrase* as ‘a “historical” continuation and prospective consummation of the longer poem.’ The connections Spanoudakis points out are doubtlessly valid and significant, but will only get us so far in determining Nonnus’ own objectives and his cultural / literary agenda for the *Paraphrase*. Thus, although it could be argued that the impersonal, initial hymn for the Theos Logos is an appropriate preface for an epic poem (as hexameter hymns did sometimes introduce longer epics),<sup>55</sup> the lack of a narrative set-up and an independent authorial voice at the beginning of the *Paraphrase* is still felt, and indeed to such a degree that Schmitz is inclined to say the poem begins *in medias res*.<sup>56</sup>

My suggestion is that the end of the *Paraphrase*, rather than the beginning, is where we should be looking for poetological reflections, as this is also where the narrator of John’s Gospel reveals that the source / author of this text is the Beloved Disciple.<sup>57</sup> I would like to start by taking a closer look at the very last episode narrated in Book 21. In the corresponding chapter of John’s Gospel, the resurrected Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him more than any other. Each time, Peter replies in variations of ‘yes’, and Jesus commands him to shepherd his [Jesus’] flock, after which he prophesies that Peter will die with his arms

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<sup>54</sup> For the text of *Par.* 1 I am using De Stefani’s (2002) edition.

<sup>55</sup> Famously, Thucydides (3.104.4-5) quotes part of the Homeric Hymn to Apollo saying it is ‘from the *prooemium* of Apollo’, ἐκ προοιμίου Ἀπόλλωνος. There is a very compressed hymn to Apollo at the beginning of Apollonius’ *Argonautica*, as well as a long tradition of opening didactic epics (from Hesiod’s *Works and Days* through Aratus’ *Phaenomena* and up to Dionysius Periegetes’ *Description of the inhabited world*) with some kind of hymn; on the relevance of this didactic tradition for the *Paraphrase* see Hadjittofi (forthcoming).

<sup>56</sup> See Schmitz (2005) 213.

<sup>57</sup> This identification will be discussed in more detail below.

stretched out (i.e., on a cross). Jesus' commands in John 21:15-17 read: Βόσκει τὰ ἀρνία μου; Ποίμαινε τὰ πρόβατά μου; and Βόσκει τὰ πρόβατά μου. In the *Paraphrase*, the corresponding commands read: βόσκε μοι ἔμφρονας ἄρνας ἀσιγήτους σέο ῥάβδῳ;<sup>58</sup> ἡμετέρων ποίμαινε νοήμονα πώεα μῆλων;<sup>59</sup> and οὐρανίη ποίμαινε καλαύροπι μῆλα καὶ ἄρνας.<sup>60</sup> Nonnus has 'embellished' the flock to be shepherded by Peter with adjectives which mean that these animals are endowed with speech and intelligence, and has added the pastoral instruments Peter will have to use: the staff and the crook. As is his practice elsewhere,<sup>61</sup> the poet starts by adhering closely to his model before striking out on his own: the first two commands repeat the exact same verbs we find in John (βόσκει for the first command, ποίμαινε for the second) and mention the same kinds of animals ('lambs' in the first one, generic 'sheep' in the second). In the third command Nonnus adds 'lambs' to the Johannine 'sheep', and uses ποίμαινε instead of (John's) βόσκει. While the differences might seem inconsequential, they could draw our attention to the fact that the conjunction ποίμαινε καλαύροπι only occurs here and at the beginning of the *Dionysiaca* (1.82: Κυπριδίη ποίμαινε καλαύροπι νυμφίον Ἥρης, same *sedes*). Following in the path forged by Spanoudakis, it is possible to detect here another 'bridge' between Nonnus' two poems, as the very last narrative of the *Paraphrase* and the opening narrative of the *Dionysiaca* both include scenes of paradoxical or metaphorical shepherding. In the first episode of the *Dionysiaca* we find Eros 'shepherding with the crook of Cypris' Zeus, who is transformed into a bull and abducting Europa – note that, like Jesus' 'sheep', Zeus is also not really an animal, and is, in fact, later described as an

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<sup>58</sup> 21.89: 'With your staff shepherd for me my unsilent, intelligent lambs.'

<sup>59</sup> 21.98: 'Shepherd the rational flocks of my sheep.'

<sup>60</sup> 21.108: 'Shepherd my sheep and lambs with the heavenly crook.'

<sup>61</sup> For one characteristic example from the *Dionysiaca* see the description of Dionysus' shield in Book 25. This extensive *ekphrasis* starts as a close imitation of the Homeric shield of Achilles, but then develops into a strikingly original composition.



‘intelligent ship’ (1.91: ἐχέφρονα νῆα).<sup>62</sup> The effect of this ‘bridge’ is again to highlight the superiority of the Christian god: Jesus is in control, and commands his disciple to tend the Christian community, whereas Zeus is himself the ‘animal’, out of control, being driven by an irrational force.

There is one further element which adds force to the idea that this final episode holds some poetological significance for the *Paraphrase*. Strikingly, after prophesying Peter’s death, Nonnus’ Jesus gives him an additional order, which is not present in the Gospel of John: that is, Nonnus’ Jesus commands Peter a fourth time to shepherd his flock, but this time he tells him to do so ‘with the blossoms of books’, (21.117: ἄρνας ἐμὰς ποιμαίνε σαόφρονας ἄνθεσι βιβλῶν). These verses have been suspected,<sup>63</sup> but, stylistically at least, seem to be Nonnian enough (this fourth command follows the same verbal pattern as the first three), and they do carry a certain metaliterary potential. The new, and entirely unexpected, command indicates that Peter will need books (and not a staff or crook) to carry out his ‘shepherding’,<sup>64</sup> and could

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<sup>62</sup> It should be noted that while the ποιμαίνε of the *Paraphrase* is a present imperative, in the *Dionysiaca* we have a, morphologically identical, imperfect.

<sup>63</sup> Marcellus (1861) 199 excises them as an interpolation by a good-humoured scribe. Scheindler, however, whose 1881 edition is the most recent one we have for this Book of the *Paraphrase*, retains them. Sieber (2016) 319 points out that 21.116 (θεὸς πάλιν ἔννεπε Πέτρῳ) follows Nonnus’ practice of referring to Jesus as ‘God’; this could also strengthen the case for the distich’s authenticity.

<sup>64</sup> For the late antique fascination with the book – ‘books of poetry’ and ‘poetry of books’ – see Agosti (2010). Kuiper (1918) 249 argues that in these verses Nonnus is alluding to apocryphal works attributed to Peter, which the poet may have used elsewhere in the epic (specifically, in 7.9, for the idea that Jesus’ ‘brothers’ are Joseph’s sons from a previous marriage). While I would not want to discount this hypothesis, it seems to me that such an outright acknowledgement of non-canonical authorities would not be compatible with the poet’s presentation of his poem as entirely Orthodox, even if, in fact, it can partly be construed in non-Orthodox ways; see Sieber (2016), and Hadjittofi (2018). For Nonnus’ reliance on the Gospel of Peter in the ‘miraculous fishing’ episode of Book 21 see now Costanza (2017).

imply that this book that we are reading now is such an instrument of teaching the Christian flock, as it propagates the Christian message through poetic, flowery language.<sup>65</sup> But still, there is no authorial voice telling us that this is what the poet set out to do. If we recall Juvencus' confident proclamation that in his verses the divine law takes on 'the earthly ornaments of language' (805: *ornamenta ... terrestria linguae*), the parallel can serve only to highlight the contrast between the attitudes of the two poets.<sup>66</sup>

After the conversation between Jesus and Peter, John's Gospel concludes with an epilogue, in which it is finally revealed that the source of the information contained in this text is the Beloved Disciple:

21:24-5: Οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ μαθητὴς ὁ μαρτυρῶν περὶ τούτων καὶ ὁ γράψας ταῦτα, καὶ οἶδμεν ὅτι ἀληθὴς αὐτοῦ ἡ μαρτυρία ἐστίν. Ἔστιν δὲ καὶ ἄλλα πολλὰ ἃ ἐποίησεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς, ἅτινα ἐὰν γράφηται καθ' ἓν, οὐδ' αὐτὸν οἶμαι τὸν κόσμον χωρῆσαι τὰ γραφόμενα βιβλία.

This is the disciple who bears witness about these things and who wrote them down, and we know that his testimony is true. There are many more things that Jesus did, which, if written down one by one, I do not think the world itself could have enough space for the books that would be written.

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<sup>65</sup> Nonnus' contemporary, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, begins his *Ecclesiastical History* by drawing an analogy between painters and historians, in which the latter use 'books instead of wooden panels, and the blossoms of speech instead of pigments' (ἀντὶ μὲν σανίδων ταῖς βίβλοις ἀντὶ δὲ χρωμάτων τοῖς τῶν λόγων ἄνθεσι κεχηρημένοι). For the 'flowery language' of Christian poetry see Venantius Fortunatus, *VSM* 1.17, where Orientius is said to have written *florente ... ore*.

<sup>66</sup> Hilhorst (1993) compares the paraphrastic techniques of Juvencus and Nonnus, and (unjustly) finds Nonnus to be the less subtle poet, but does not consider any poetological issues or the two poets' self-positioning in their poems.

Nonnus' rendition of these final lines is the second passage in which, I argue, it is possible to detect a subtle metaliterary hint:

*Par.* 21.135-43: ... οὗτος ὁπωπῇ  
ἀθρήσας ὁμόφοιτος ἀλήμονος ἐκτὸς ἀκουῆς  
ἔργων θεσπεσίων ἐπιμάρτυρός ἐστι μαθητής.  
καὶ νοέων τάδε πάντα κατέγραφε θέσπιδι βίβλῳ.  
ἄλλα δὲ θαύματα πολλὰ σοφῇ σφρηγίσσατο σιγῇ  
μάρτυς ἐτητυμίας, τάπερ ἦνυσεν αὐτὸς Ἰησοῦς, (140)  
ὅσσα καθ' ἓν στοιχηδὸν ἀνὴρ βροτὸς αἶκε χαράξῃ,  
βίβλους τοσσατίας νεοτευχέας οὐδὲ καὶ αὐτὸν  
ἔλπομαι ἀγλαόμορφον ἀτέρμονα κόσμον ἀεῖραι.

He, having seen (135)  
with his eyes as His fellow-traveller and not [learning] from erring hearsay,  
is the disciple who witnessed the divine deeds.  
And perceiving all these things, he wrote them down in the book filled with the words of God.  
But many other miracles the witness of truth  
sealed shut in wise silence, miracles which Jesus himself accomplished, (140)  
so numerous that if a mortal man inscribed them one by one, line by line,  
so many newly wrought books I think  
not even the beautiful, boundless world itself could hold.

Agosti has already argued that these final verses contain some poetological reflection. His argument centres on the adjective νεοτευχέας, a Homeric *hapax* which Nonnus uses to

qualify the Johannine βιβλία, and which earlier poets had also employed to highlight the innovative nature of their poetry.<sup>67</sup> For Agosti, Nonnus advertises through this adjective the new book(s), written in his characteristic, modern style. More recently, Faulkner has expressed doubts regarding the self-reflexivity of νεοτευχής. He objects that it would 'be quite a boast to set one's own poetic output in apposition to the numerous books needed to record all the deeds of Christ', and points out that the same adjective was used twice more in the *Paraphrase* 'without any programmatic implication.'<sup>68</sup> While the two other attestations of νεοτευχής in the poem are not self-reflexive in any obvious way, they, nevertheless, can have some bearing on the present passage. In 14.5-9 Jesus tells his disciples that the heavenly abode has many chambers to receive them: 'if my court / was not stretched wide, with many chambers to receive all, / I would have told you that I go ahead of you on the path, / in order to prepare the abode of the capacious court / and weave a newly wrought place (νεοτευχέα χώρον) worthy of you.'<sup>69</sup> Like the 'newly wrought books' that will never be written, the 'newly wrought place' in heaven is part of a counterfactual conditional, and, like them, it will never come to be, but for the very opposite reasons from those we find in the epilogue: in Book 14, the heavenly abode already has enough space and no new chambers will be needed; in the epilogue, the world does not have enough space to contain the never-to-be-written books

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<sup>67</sup> See Agosti (2001) 96, with references to Timoth. *Pers.* 203 and Theoc. 1.27-8.

<sup>68</sup> See Faulkner (2014) 207-8.

<sup>69</sup> 14.5-9: εὐρυτενῆς δέ / εἰ μὴ πουλυμέλαθρος ἐμὴ πέλε πανδόκος αὐλή / ὑμῖν καὶ κεν ἔειπον ὅτι προκέλευθος ὁδεύσω / ὅφρα κεν ἐντύνω πολυχανδέος ἔνδιον αὐλῆς / ἄξιον ὑμείων νεοτευχέα χώρον ὑφαίνων. I omit punctuation in the text for reasons that will become obvious in the following note. The validity of the translation proposed here hinges on the addition of νεοτευχέα χώρον, as will be explained below.

which would record all of Jesus' miracles.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, the idea that Jesus would create a 'newly wrought place' is notably absent from John's Gospel, which merely speaks of 'preparing' the place – perhaps inspired by Cyril, Nonnus' νεοτευχέα χώρον is as much his own creation as it is Jesus'.<sup>71</sup> The only other appearance of νεοτευχής in the poem again refers to an act of creation by Jesus (and the poet). In John 9:6, Jesus heals the man born blind by applying on his eyes the mud he has formed by spitting on the ground. Nonnus innovates here by presenting the blind man as lacking eyes (or having eyes that are somehow 'undivided and uninscribed'; 9.5: ἀμέριστον ἔχων ἀχάρακτον ὀπωπτήν), which Jesus

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<sup>70</sup> The interpretation of the Johannine pericope is difficult, as it depends on the punctuation different editors adopt. John 14:2 reads (omitting punctuation but otherwise following Nestle – Aland) ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ τοῦ πατρὸς μου μοναὶ πολλαὶ εἰσιν εἰ δὲ μή εἶπον ἂν ὑμῖν ὅτι πορεύομαι ἐτοιμάσαι τόπον ὑμῖν. Some editions end the sentence with a question mark, while others have a strong break before ὅτι. Thus, the translation of the New International Version reads, 'My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?', while the New American Standard Bible has, 'In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you.' Ancient commentators, however, seem to interpret this sentence in the same way as Nonnus, that is, without the question mark. John Chrysostom states that 'there is an abundance of lodgings there, and it cannot be said that preparation is needed' (*PG* 59.397: Ἀφθονία γὰρ ἐκεῖ πολλή καταγωγίων, καὶ οὐκ ἔνι εἰπεῖν ὅτι ἐτοιμασίας δεῖται). Closer to Nonnus, and more relevant for his use of νεοτευχής, is Cyril of Alexandria, whose commentary clarifies Jesus' teaching as, 'the heaven is capacious enough, and the world built by Him does not need any addition whatsoever in order to be able to contain those who love Him.' (2.403 Pusey: πολυχώρητόν τινα διδάσκων εἶναι τὸν οὐρανόν, καὶ προσθήκης οὐδεμιᾶς δεῖσθαι παντελῶς τὴν παρ' αὐτοῦ γενομένην κτίσιν εἰς τὸ δύνασθαι λαβεῖν τοὺς ἀγαπῶντας αὐτόν). While Chrysostom stays closer to the Johannine ἐτοιμάσαι with his ἐτοιμασίας δεῖται, Cyril's προσθήκη raises the possibility of new additions to the building, which Nonnus may be echoing with his νεοτευχέα χώρον.

<sup>71</sup> See the note above.

goes on to mould with the ‘familiar mud, out of man-begetting dust’ (9.33-4: ὀφθαλμούς τελέων νεοτευχέας ἡθάδι πηλῷ / ἐκ χοῶς ἀνδρογόνοιο)<sup>72</sup>. Nonnus, therefore, makes this scene into a second Genesis by explicitly recalling God’s creation of man.<sup>73</sup> The blind man’s ‘newly wrought eyes’ are evidently fashioned by Jesus, but, in a way, ‘added’ by Nonnus, as the poet once more introduces exegesis into his poetic rendering of the Gospel. Faulkner’s suggestion that the poet would not put his own work on a par with the obviously unattainable βίβλους τοσσατίας is valid, but it ought to be further qualified: both the use of νεοτευχής elsewhere in the epic and its positioning in the narratively privileged epilogue allow us to see here a subtle hint towards the poet’s careful innovations in his retelling of the Gospel, perhaps only one ‘newly wrought’ book among the τοσσατίας that could (but will never) be written.

#### The *Paraphrase* and / as the Gospel

If this hint is felt to be rather too subtle (and it *is* true that Nonnus does not, in any way, advertise his input), we must return to the epilogue and ask what it can tell us about the

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<sup>72</sup> Cf. 9.30: ἀνέρος ἐπλασεν ὄμμα, τὸ μὴ φύσις εὖρεν ὀπάσσαι (‘He moulded the man’s eye, which nature was not able to grant’). In the ἀμέριστον of 9.5 there might be a reference to the beginning of Genesis, where God separates out (διεχώρισεν) the different elements.

<sup>73</sup> Ancient commentators point out that Jesus’ use of his spittle is meant to recall his role as creator of the world (and man). As Cyril put it, ‘For He anoints with mud, improving [or ‘adding’, προστιθείς] what is, so to speak, lacking or faulty in the nature of his eye, and He shows by this that He was the one who created us at the beginning, the artificer and demiurge of the universe.’ (2.157 Pusey: καταχρίει μὲν γὰρ τῷ πηλῷ τὸ λεῖπον ὥσπερ καὶ ἡμαρτημένον τῇ τοῦ ὀμματος φύσει προστιθείς, καὶ δεικνὺς διὰ τούτου, ὡς αὐτὸς ἦν ὁ πλάσας ἡμᾶς ἐν ἀρχῇ, κτίστης τε καὶ δημιουργὸς τοῦ παντός). John Chrysostom concurs (*in Jo. PG* 59.308: διδάσκων ἑαυτὸν εἶναι δημιουργὸν τὸν ἐν ἀρχῇ), and waxes lyrical on the superiority of sight in relation to other senses. Asterius of Amasea expounds on this miracle in *hom.* 7, where he references the creation of the world throughout. For further symbolic readings of this miracle in Nonnus and Cyril see, recently, Lefteratou (2016).

narrator of the poem. The astonishing answer to that question is, ‘absolutely nothing’. Where a reader might have expected to find a *sphragis* containing some information on the author of the poem,<sup>74</sup> or the poet’s farewell to his work,<sup>75</sup> Nonnus uses wording reminiscent of Theognis’ famous self-naming *sphragis* (σοφιζομένωι μὲν ἔμοι σφρηγίς ἐπικείσθω)<sup>76</sup> to negate further information and effectively shroud himself in silence (21.139: σοφῇ σφρηγίσσατο σιγῇ). Although to ‘seal something in silence’ is quasi-formulaic in Nonnus, the combination of sealing, silence, and wisdom only occurs here and in 11.145, exactly in the middle of the epic, where the Nonnian Jesus tells Martha to keep silent (in Nonnus’ wording, ‘place on her lips the wise seal of silence’, σοφὴν σφρηγίδα σιωπῆς), an order which is remarkably absent in

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<sup>74</sup> Such *sphragides* placed at the end of a work (and not closer to the beginning as in Hes. *Theog.* 22-3) appear already in Hellenistic poetry (see Nic. *Ther.* 957-8), and become more standard in Roman poetry (see, e.g., Verg. *G.* 4.563-6, and Ov. *Ars am.* 3.809-12). In Late Antiquity this practice is extended to prose too: Heliodorus provides information about himself at the end of his *Aethiopica* (10.41.4). For Gregory of Nazianzus ‘signing’ his name at the end of some of his poems see above, n. 23.

<sup>75</sup> Statius ends his *Thebaid* with an *aposiopesis*, saying he lacks the inspiration to recount all the funerals and lamentations (12.797-809), but he then confidently bids his epic farewell (810-19), wishing that it has a *benignum ... iter* (812-13) and that it outlives him (816: *vive, precor*).

<sup>76</sup> For allusions to Theognis elsewhere in the *Paraphrase* see Hadjittofi (forthcoming). The full *sphragis* passage (Thgn. 1.19-23) reads thus: Κύρνε, σοφιζομένωι μὲν ἔμοι σφρηγίς ἐπικείσθω / τοῖσδ' ἔπεσιν, λήσει δ' οὔποτε κλεπτόμενα, / οὐδέ τις ἀλλάξει κάκιον τοῦσθλοῦ παρεόντος· / ὦδε δὲ πᾶς τις ἐρεῖ· «Θεὺ γινῶς ἐστιν ἔπη / τοῦ Μεγαρέως· πάντα δὲ κατ' ἀνθρώπους ὀνομαστός». What precisely constitutes the ‘seal’ is a mystery, and various possibilities have been suggested; e.g., Ford (1985) argues that it is the poet’s name, while Pratt (1995) maintains that it stands for writing. It should be noted that the word σφραγίς did not have, in Antiquity, the technical sense it has today. In Late Antiquity σφραγίς can, in fact, function as a metaphor for Christian identity – e.g., ‘to receive the seal of divine truth’; see Rapp (2015) – but Nonnus’ use here does not carry that meaning.

John.<sup>77</sup> It should also be noted that John's Gospel does not mention 'silence' here, and that it is, perhaps, paradoxical that the poet would want to end the Gospel of the Logos on a note of silence,<sup>78</sup> which, at least in theory, is the opposite of the authorial pose of frankness and full disclosure to which readers would be more accustomed.<sup>79</sup>

The use of a first person verb in Nonnus' epilogue, in the very last verse of the poem (21.143), represents another dead-end in any attempt to identify a poet-narrator for the *Paraphrase*. Nonnus' ἔλπομαι 'translates' the Gospel's οἶμαι, maintaining the same person, number, and tense, and thus creates the impression that the one who speaks here is the Evangelist himself. In these first person verbs, the ἔλπομαι of Nonnus and the οἶμαι of the Gospel, the poet and the Evangelist merge into a single authorial voice. This ventriloquism recalls (and is reinforced by) Nonnus' equally striking rendering of the only other passage in which the Evangelist speaks in a first person verb.<sup>80</sup> Right at the beginning of the epic, in

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<sup>77</sup> The combination of the three words is rare in general. Spanoudakis (2014) n. on 11.145b draws attention to a passage in Nilus of Ancyra, *Ep.* 158, where the 'wise man and guardian of the mysteries' is invited to place on his lips 'the seal of silence' (τὴν σφραγίδα τῆς σιγῆς). One could also compare Hld. *Aeth.* 6.15.4.2: σοφὸς γὰρ τὰ τοιαῦτα σιγῇ ... ἐπισφραγίσασθαι ('for he is wise enough to lock such things [i.e. the forbidden, necromantic rituals] away in silence').

<sup>78</sup> Peirano (2014), however, observes that *sphragides* in Roman poetry are frequently marked by allusions to death, which is naturally associated with finality. Silence belongs in the same nexus of concepts, but does not come up in the texts she discusses.

<sup>79</sup> E.g., Nonnus' near-contemporary, Ammianus Marcellinus, ends his *Res Gestae* by assuring his readers that he never consciously 'corrupted' his work with silence or falsehood (31.16.9: *numquam, ut arbitror, sciens silentio ausus corrumpere vel mendacio*). Nonnus himself frequently associates silence with darkness and concealment (and Jesus is, of course, the light; 1.3 ἐκ φάεος φῶς); see, e.g., *Par.* 2.120, 3.106, and 7.17.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Schmitz (2005) 214, who identifies the 'ventriloquism' in ἔλπομαι, but does not draw any conclusions from it.



1.42-3, Nonnus says that ‘His glory / we saw with our human eyes’ (κλέος αὐτοῦ / εἶδομεν ἀνδρομέοισιν ἐν ὄμμασιν). Nonnus’ εἶδομεν ‘translates’ the Johannine first person verb ἐθεασάμεθα (John 1:14: καὶ ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ), again maintaining the same person, number, and tense. If taken at face value, εἶδομεν implies that the poet-narrator of this poem is one of the people who witnessed Christ’s glory with their own eyes.

The thesis I put forward in this article is that Nonnus does not leave any trace of his identity inside the poem, because he does not set out to write a παράφρασις or a μεταβολή of the Gospel (both valid titles, but which do not appear nor are alluded to inside the text itself).<sup>81</sup> Nonnus apparently intends to write *the* Gospel, and ‘become’ John the Evangelist by doing so. The lack of deictics in the epilogue is telling. When Nonnus says that he (i.e. the Beloved Disciple) is the one who, ‘having perceived all these things, wrote them down in the book filled with the words of God’ (21.138: καὶ νοέων τάδε πάντα κατέγραφε θέσπιδι βιβλῳ), he introduces no deictic to differentiate between this poem and the Gospel.<sup>82</sup> Which is ‘the book filled with the words of God’? Is it the Gospel, or this book that we are reading here, or both? The answer, I would argue, should be ‘both’, because, on some level, they are one and the same text. This observation is born out by Nonnus’ rendition of the interim ‘epilogue’, which closes Book 20, and also centres on the idea that the ‘witness of truth’, who is not identified with the Beloved Disciple on this occasion, omitted many miracles from his account.<sup>83</sup> This is the passage as paraphrased by Nonnus.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> The Gospel is never identified as a text separate from its poetic rendition. Contrast, e.g., the poet of the *Metaphrasis Psalmorum*, who explicitly refers to the Old Testament Psalms and the Septuaginta translation commissioned by Ptolemy; see the Introduction above.

<sup>82</sup> Contrast Eudocia’s τῇνδε ... βιβλον, mentioned above (Introduction).

<sup>83</sup> Modern criticism of John’s Gospel considers chapter 21 a later addition to the original text, which must have closed with the epilogue of chapter 20, and which, thus, would not have included an identification of its author with the Beloved Disciple. On this basis, some scholars argue that all

*Par.* 20.136-42: ἄλλα δὲ θαύματα πολλὰ σοφῶν προπάροιθεν ἐταίρων

Ἰησοῦς ἐτέλεσσε, πολύτροπα σήματα φαίνων,

μάρτυς ἀληθείης τάπερ οὐ γράφε θέσπιδι βίβλῳ,

ὃς τάδε πάντα χάραξε, θελήμονι κάλλιπε σιγῇ.

ταῦτα δὲ πάντα πέλει τετυπωμένα μάρτυρι δέλτῳ, (140)

ὄφρα κε πίστιν ἔχοιτε βιοσσόον, ὅτι τοκῆς

Χριστὸς ἀειζώοιο θεοῦ γόνος ἐστὶν Ἰησοῦς·

In front of His wise companions, many other miracles

Jesus performed, revealing manifold signs,

which the witness of truth did not write in the book filled with the words of God;

he who inscribed all these things left those in voluntary silence.

But all of these things have been imprinted in the testifying tablet, (140)

so that you may have the life-giving faith that Jesus

Christ is the offspring of God, the ever-living parent.<sup>85</sup>

Again we have a τάδε πάντα, which refers to the contents of the Gospel, and by extension the

*Paraphrase*, accompanied by a reference to ‘the book filled with the words of God’ (138:

θέσπιδι βίβλῳ; the same conjunction, in the same *sedes*, and same line number is found in

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references to the Beloved Disciple are not original and were introduced by the later redactor(s); see the overview in Schnackenburg (1975) 380, who admits the hypothesis cannot be verified.

<sup>84</sup> For the text I am using Accorinti’s (1996) edition.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. John 20:30-31: Πολλὰ μὲν οὖν καὶ ἄλλα σημεῖα ἐποίησεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἐνώπιον τῶν μαθητῶν [αὐτοῦ], ἃ οὐκ ἔστιν γεγραμμένα ἐν τῷ βιβλίῳ τούτῳ· ταῦτα δὲ γέγραπται ἵνα πιστεύ[σ]ητε ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἐστὶν ὁ χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, καὶ ἵνα πιστεύοντες ζωὴν ἔχητε ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι αὐτοῦ.

21.138). In this passage too there is no deictic marker to set Gospel and *Paraphrase* apart. It is significant that John's Gospel does include a deictic here, when it says that many miracles are not written in *this* book (20:30: ἐν τῷ βιβλίῳ τούτῳ). Nonnus' immediately following mention of a book, in v. 140 (ταῦτα δὲ πάντα πέλει τετυπωμένα μάρτυρι δέλτῳ), is just as ambiguous, as it could equally refer to the Gospel itself (the original 'testifying tablet') or its poetic rendition, since the *Paraphrase* still contains 'all of these things', and thus continues to bear testimony for Christ. The introduction of an author-figure, 'he who inscribed all these things', in v. 139 (ὃς τάδε πάντα χάραξε) – where John's Gospel only has an agent-less passive construction (20:30: ἃ οὐκ ἔστιν γεγραμμένα) – similarly conflates the poet and the Evangelist: both of them have, in fact, 'inscribed all these things', but we only have a singular ὃς here, implying that the two are, paradoxically, one.

Returning to Nonnus' final epilogue in Book 21, it is not necessarily clear here either that the authorial οὗτος right at the beginning of that passage is someone other than the author of *this* text<sup>86</sup>. When we read, in John's Gospel (21:24), Οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ μαθητὴς ὁ μαρτυρῶν περὶ τούτων καὶ ὁ γράψας ταῦτα, we instinctively assume (and ancient commentators did so too) that the Evangelist, the one 'who wrote these things', is referring to himself in the third person, and revealing that he was involved as a character (the Beloved Disciple) in the narrative all along without us knowing it.<sup>87</sup> There is absolutely nothing in the way Nonnus renders this

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<sup>86</sup> 21.135-8: οὗτος ὁπωπῇ / ἀθρήσας ὁμόφοιτος ἀλήμονος ἐκτὸς ἀκουῆς / ἔργων θεσπεσίων ἐπιμάρτυρός ἐστι μαθητὴς / καὶ νοέων τάδε πάντα κατέγραφε θέσπιδι βιβλῳ. For the translation see above.

<sup>87</sup> Or, to put it in modern critical terms, the first-time reader assumes all along that the narrator of the Gospel is extradiegetic, but in the epilogue he is revealed to have been intradiegetic. For the 'metaleptic' shock of this revelation see Eisen (2013) 327. The identification of the Beloved Disciple with John the son of Zebedee is today far from certain – see the overviews in Culpepper (1994), and Waetjen (2005) 3-60 – but no such doubts existed in Nonnus' time.

sentence that would prevent us from making the same assumption about the identity of the *Paraphrase's* οὐτος, even though we, of course, know that this text is not the Gospel, and its author is not the Evangelist.<sup>88</sup>

In a way, Nonnus' impersonation of John the Evangelist is an entirely 'classical' strategy of authenticating his text and, perhaps, indicating its generic affiliation ('Gospel' more than 'epic').<sup>89</sup> As scholars have long observed, ancient poets do not just imitate other texts, but impersonate other poets (usually the πρώτοι εὐρεταί), meaning that one who sets out to compose iambic blame poetry 'becomes' Archilochus, one who composes a theogony 'becomes' Hesiod, and so forth.<sup>90</sup> Poets earlier than Nonnus also experimented with close

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<sup>88</sup> Nonnus does not paraphrase the second part of John 21:24 (καὶ οἶδμεν ὅτι ἀληθὴς αὐτοῦ ἡ μαρτυρία ἐστίν, 'and we know that his testimony is true'), which, scholars nowadays usually assume, reflects the later editor(s) or redactor(s) who gave the Gospel its final shape, and whose presence (as distinct from the original author) is made manifest here; see above, n. 83. This omission could be intentional or, equally, could be due to the precise version of the Gospel Nonnus was using, and which remains a mystery; see Spanoudakis (2014) 96-100. It is tempting to think that Nonnus' model had 'transferred' this first person plural to John 19:35: here the Gospel, as it has come down to us, has a third person singular, referring to the witnessing disciple who, strangely, 'knows he speaks the truth' (καὶ ἐκεῖνος οἶδεν ὅτι ἀληθὴ λέγει); Nonnus renders this problematic phrase with a more straightforward (but otherwise unattested) first person plural: ἀριστονόοιο δὲ κείνου / ἴδμεν ὅτι ζαθέη καὶ ἐπήτυμος ἔπλετο φωνή (19.183-4: 'And we know that the voice of that excellently wise man was sacred and true'). See Accorinti (1987) n. *ad loc.* with further bibliography in favour of the argument that Nonnus' model text was different from ours and read ἐκεῖνον οἶδμεν instead of ἐκεῖνος οἶδεν.

<sup>89</sup> For some reflections on the genre of the *Paraphrase*, with emphasis on the neglected but important role of didactic epic, see Hadjittofi (forthcoming).

<sup>90</sup> See Nagy (1979) 243-52. Cf. Whitmarsh (2013) 239, and, for Roman lyric poetry, Barchiesi (2000) 168-170. Rosenmeyer (2006) 436 goes so far as to argue that this fixation on model-poets means that the ancients did not have a concept of literary genre.

adaptations of their models. Catullus 51 is a near-translation of Sappho 31 (but Catullus does not quite ‘become’ Sappho, as he mentions his own name, v. 13, and that of Lesbia, v. 7). The *Posthomeric* of Quintus of Smyrna lacks a proem, and presents itself as ‘still’ the *Iliad*, picking up the story from Hector’s funeral, exactly where the *Iliad* left off.<sup>91</sup> The narrator of this epic not only speaks like Homer, replicating Homeric language and style, but also inserts a pseudo-autobiographical interlude whose details can easily be ascribed to ‘the real’ Homer.<sup>92</sup> This poet’s impersonation of his great predecessor is, thus, a thorough and sustained conceit, and can be compared to Nonnus’ meticulously constructed fiction that he ‘is’ John the Evangelist.

It is clear that, at least for certain types of poetry, the impersonation of older, canonical models hinges on the (re)performativity of texts: poets take up their personae like actors take up masks, and create an illusion of identity with their models – ‘an illusion that was ever predicated on universal awareness of its unreality’.<sup>93</sup> In a cultural milieu where declamation – the pinnacle of rhetorical education – involved precisely such a self-aware identification of the (present) speaker with the (past) icons of myth and classical history, poets could be, and were, conceptualised as declaimers and actors.<sup>94</sup> Although Nonnus’ poems are obviously ‘bookish’ compositions, their (re)performativity should not be ignored. The fact that the narrator of the *Paraphrase* ‘becomes’ John can usefully be examined within the context of

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<sup>91</sup> The poem begins with a temporal conjunction (ἐϋτε) that links it to the *Iliad*; see Maciver (2012) 29.

<sup>92</sup> For the narrator of the *Posthomeric* behaving as if he is ‘the real’ Homer see Bär (2009) 12. The interlude or ‘in-proem’ of Book 12, which presents the poet as a young shepherd in Smyrna, is examined in Maciver (2012) 33-8; cf. Greensmith (2018).

<sup>93</sup> The quote is from Whitmarsh (2013) 241, who uses this notion for the ‘fictional autobiographer’ in general and not only for the poet.

<sup>94</sup> For the memorable comparison of Homer to a pantomime dancer by a late antique orator, see Choricus of Gaza, *Dialexis* 12 (= *Op.* 21) with Hadjittofi (2017).

oral delivery, and ought to reinforce recent attempts to examine the *Paraphrase* as a text that was not just read by individuals, but performed in front of an audience, perhaps even in a liturgical setting.<sup>95</sup> Nonnus' contemporary, Synesius of Cyrene, provides a vivid example of how, in his public reading of written texts, he identifies to such a degree with the author whose text he performs that he often makes impromptu additions, which are lauded as much as the original text (*Dio* 18.14-25):

ἤδη δέ ποτε οἶδα, περικαθημένων ἀνθρώπων ἐτύγχανον μὲν τῶν εὐγενῶν καὶ στασίμων τι συγγραμμάτων ἔχων ἐν ταῖν χεροῖν, δεομένων δὲ ἀναγινώσκειν εἰς κοινὴν ἀκοὴν ἐποιοῦν οὕτως· εἰ δέ ποτε παρείκοι, προσεξεῦρον ἂν τι καὶ προσηρμήνευσα· οὐ μὰ τὸν λόγιον, οὐκ ἐπιτηδεύσας, ἀλλ' ἐπελθὼν οὕτως συνεχώρησα τῇ γνώμῃ τε καὶ τῇ γλώττῃ. Καὶ δῆτα θόρυβος ἦρθη πολὺς, καὶ κρότος ἐρράγη τὸν ἄνδρα ἐπαινούντων ἐκεῖνον, ὅτου τὸ σύγγραμμα ἦν, ἐπ' αὐταῖς οὐχ ἥκιστα ταῖς προσθήκαις. Οὕτω μοι τὴν ψυχὴν ὁ θεὸς ἀπαλὸν ἐκμαγεῖον ἐποίησεν τῶν ἐν λέξεσιν τε καὶ ἤθεσι χαρακτήρων.<sup>96</sup>

I know that one time, I happened to have some noble and weighty composition in my hands, and when those sitting around me asked me to read so that everyone might hear, I proceeded in this manner. Whenever it was appropriate, I would invent something or add an explanation – not, by the God of Discourse [Hermes], having prepared it, but rather whatever occurred to me I yielded it, just as it was, to my thought and tongue. Then indeed a great uproar arose, and applause broke out as they praised that man whose composition it was, and not least for my own additions. Thus the god made my soul a receptacle of soft wax for the words and characters to be imprinted on.

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<sup>95</sup> See MacCoull (2007), Agosti (2016) 27, and Hadjittofi (2018) 171-3.

<sup>96</sup> The text is that of Lamoureux – Aujoulat (2004). There is brief discussion of this passage in Konstan (2009) 5.

What Synesius describes here approximates the process of *paraphrasis*. Synesius is both the reader of a fixed text, and the ‘author’, in his own right, of that same text. Like the Platonic Ion, he becomes so enthralled in the performance, that his soul receives the imprints of the original text,<sup>97</sup> and he becomes the ideal conduit for that text’s transmission. Unlike the rhapsodic rapture of Ion, however, Synesius’ enthusiasm does not lead him to lose his own identity. He is still able to make additions and append interpretations, in the same manner that the poet of the *Paraphrase* amplifies and interprets John’s Gospel (mostly through adjectives like νεοτευχής), but without ever destroying the conceit that he ‘is’ John. Like the *Paraphrase*, the text that results from Synesius’ performance both ‘is’ and ‘is not’ the original composition, and the audience certainly appreciates this duality. The fictional identification of the *Paraphrase*’s poet-narrator with the Evangelist would also be all the more effective and striking in a performative context, where any first-person statements (εἶδομεν, ἔλπομαι) are more readily attributed to the speaking ‘I’. The lack of autobiographical details and autonomous authorial voice in the *Paraphrase*, which appeared so incongruous with the poet’s practice in the *Dionysiaca*, can now be explained as a device that would allow any performer, in all subsequent readings, to also ‘become’ John the Evangelist.

#### Conclusion: The Poet and / as the Evangelist

But why was it so important for the poet-narrator of the *Paraphrase* (as well as its subsequent performers) to ‘become’ John? As well as honouring the Evangelist and his text, this impersonation, I argue, ought to be seen as an exercise in Christian ὁμοίωσις θεῷ. The

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<sup>97</sup> Note also the Platonic echo in ἐκμαγεῖον, taken from *Tht.* 191c. Of course such performative readings, in which the reader’s ‘I’ is transformed into the ‘I’ of the text, are not exclusive to the Greek world. For discussion of an analogous practice in relation to the Qumran *hodayot*, where the performative reading of a text can result in a new exegetical text, see Harkins (2011).

idea that one can really ‘become’ John (and by doing so ‘become’ Jesus) had already occurred to a prominent Alexandrian theologian and commentator on John’s Gospel, Origen.<sup>98</sup> The crucial passage comes from the prologue to this commentary (1.4.23):

Τολμητέον τοίνυν εἰπεῖν τῶν δὲ εὐαγγελίων ἀπαρχὴν τὸ κατὰ Ἰωάννην, οὐ τὸν νοῦν οὐδεὶς δύναται λαβεῖν μὴ ἀναπεσὼν ἐπὶ τὸ στήθος Ἰησοῦ μηδὲ λαβὼν ἀπὸ Ἰησοῦ τὴν Μαρίαν γινομένην καὶ αὐτοῦ μητέρα. Καὶ τηλικούτον δὲ γενέσθαι δεῖ τὸν ἐσόμενον ἄλλον Ἰωάννην, ὥστε οἶονεῖ τὸν Ἰωάννην δειχθῆναι ὄντα Ἰησοῦν ὑπὸ Ἰησοῦ. Εἰ γὰρ οὐδεὶς υἱὸς Μαρίας κατὰ τοὺς ὑγιῶς περὶ αὐτῆς δοξάζοντας ἢ Ἰησοῦς, φησὶ δὲ Ἰησοῦς τῇ μητρὶ· «Ἴδε ὁ υἱός σου» καὶ οὐχὶ «Ἴδε καὶ οὗτος υἱός σου», ἴσον εἶρηκε τῷ «Ἴδε οὗτός ἐστιν Ἰησοῦς ὃν ἐγέννησας».

I would dare say, then, that the firstfruits of the Gospels is the one according to John, whose meaning (νοῦς) nobody can comprehend, unless he has also reclined in the bosom of Jesus or received Mary from Jesus to become his mother too. But the one who is to become another John needs to be such that, like John, he will be shown by Jesus to be Jesus. For, if, according to those who hold a sound opinion of her, Mary had no son but Jesus, and Jesus tells His mother, ‘Behold your son’, and not, ‘Behold, he too is your son’, it is as if He had said, ‘Behold, this is Jesus, whom you bore.’

Origen believes that the ideal reader of John’s Gospel is the one who will become ‘another John’ (ἄλλον Ἰωάννην). What this controversial commentator had perceptively observed is that in the two actions he refers to here, John, the Beloved Disciple, becomes a double of

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<sup>98</sup> For significant concurrences between Nonnus’ *Paraphrase* and Origen’s commentary on John see De Stefani (2002) 166, and Spanoudakis (2014) 21, who also notes some points of evident disagreement. I argue in Hadjittofi (2018) that Nonnus’ rendition of certain passages having to do with Jesus’ passion and resurrection allows for an Origenist / Nestorian interpretation.



Jesus.<sup>99</sup> First, at the beginning of the Gospel, Jesus is in the bosom of his Father<sup>100</sup>. In the famous last supper scene, John reclines in the bosom of Jesus<sup>101</sup>. Then, at the crucifixion, Jesus entrusts his mother to John, telling her, 'Behold your son', and not 'one more son'. For Origen, it follows that Jesus designates John to 'become' Jesus. Origen's argument, therefore, is that it is possible for the ideal reader of the Gospel not only to 'become' John, but also, through John, to 'become' Jesus, the son of Mary.<sup>102</sup> Nonnus' narrator embodies this process of 'becoming' John, and therefore 'becoming' Jesus, through writing and performing *the Gospel of John*. He thus also allows subsequent readers and performers of his poem to follow him in this path towards *ὁμοίωσις θεῷ*.<sup>103</sup>

Nonnus' Jesus, indeed, places a great amount of emphasis on the idea that his disciples are (or should become) his identical copies – and he does so using vocabulary that oscillates

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<sup>99</sup> Modern criticism on John's Gospel largely relies on the same arguments for the characterisation of the Beloved Disciple; see, e.g., Eisen (2013) 333-4.

<sup>100</sup> John 1:18: Θεὸν οὐδεὶς ἑώρακεν πώποτε· μονογενὴς Θεὸς ὁ ὢν εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς, ἐκεῖνος ἐξηγήσατο.

<sup>101</sup> John 13:23: ἦν ἀνακείμενος εἰς ἐκ τῶν μαθητῶν αὐτοῦ ἐν τῷ κόλπῳ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ, ὃν ἠγάπα ὁ Ἰησοῦς.

<sup>102</sup> Trigg (2003) 958-9 remarks that, implicitly, Origen presents himself as such a person – and see Urbano (2018) 14-15 for evidence that his students saw him as somebody who had achieved 'likeness to God' and who could lead them in the same direction. Trigg goes on to argue that Cyril's approach is different, in that it does not require the reader to be transformed into a new Jesus in order to understand the Gospel; 'a competent bishop can point out what it means' (964).

<sup>103</sup> For the *ὁμοίωσις θεῷ* see the classic study of Sedley (1999) and, more recently, Tsuchihashi (2015). It is, perhaps, telling that Nonnus describes the Beloved Disciple, when reclining in the bosom of Jesus (13.107: *στήθεσιν ἀχράντοισι πεσὼν πεφιλημένος ἀνὴρ*), with a formula that is *not* reserved exclusively for him, but is also applied to the healed blind man of Book 9 (56: *θεῷ πεφιλημένος ἀνὴρ*), and indeed to any man who abides by God's commandments and can thus become God's 'beloved'; see 6.204 and 14.81 (both verses ending in *θεῷ πεφιλημένος ἀνὴρ*). Cf. Greco (2004) n. *ad loc.*

between the notions of ‘making a copy’ (that is, something that is still different) and ‘really becoming one and the same’. One marked example of the Nonnian Jesus’ paradoxical vocabulary of imitation can be found in the speech he delivers after washing his disciples’ feet. Here, he explains he did this, so ‘[that you] / should learn how to practice a replicated imitation of my deed (ἀντίτυπον μίμημα), / and wash with water the feet of one another. / For this was done as an example to teach you, in order that you too / may perform the wise deed which I have done, / all of you in reciprocal manner amongst yourselves, / in exact imitation (ἰσοφυές μίμημα) of your wise leader.’<sup>104</sup> The stress on imitation is seminally present in the Gospel, where Jesus says he provided an ὑπόδειγμα (‘example’) for his disciples,<sup>105</sup> and it cannot be denied that the vocabulary of imitation plays an important role in Nonnus’ overall poetic aesthetics. But we can go beyond Nonnus’ noted penchant for the type of expressions that focus on copying and imitating.<sup>106</sup> Even in the *Dionysiaca* such expressions can be pushed to the extreme, and imitation can become identity: at 19.346-8 the metamorphosed Silenus is called the ἰσοφυές μίμημα of the river, at a moment when he has already turned into the river, and the narration of the miraculous event has reached its end. At that point, Silenus is not a ‘replica’ of the river; he *is* the river. In the *Paraphrase*, when Jesus exhorts his

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<sup>104</sup> See 13.67-73 ed. Greco (2004): ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτοῦς / ἀντίτυπον θέμις ἐστὶν ἐμὸν μίμημα μαθόντας / ὑμέας ἀλλήλων φιλίου πόδας ὕδατι νίπτειν. / δῆγμα γὰρ ἔπλετο τοῦτο διδάσκαλον, ὄφρα καὶ ὑμεῖς / ἔργον, ὅπερ ποίησα σοφόν, τελέσητε καὶ αὐτοὶ / πάντες ἐν ἀλλήλοισιν ἀμοιβαίῳ τινὶ θεσμῷ / ἰσοφυές μίμημα δαήμονος ἡγεμονῆος.

<sup>105</sup> John 13:14-15: καὶ ὑμεῖς ὀφείλετε ἀλλήλων νίπτειν τοὺς πόδας· ὑπόδειγμα γὰρ ἔδωκα ὑμῖν ἵνα καθὼς ἐγὼ ἐποίησα ὑμῖν καὶ ὑμεῖς ποιήτε.

<sup>106</sup> For these expressions and their oracular / Neoplatonic background (but with a focus on the *Dionysiaca*) see Gigli Piccardi (1985) 233-7.

students to behave like his exact replicas, what ἀντίτυπον or ἰσοφυῆς μίμημα implies is, in this case, the spiritual metamorphosis of becoming like God, ὁμοίωσις θεῷ<sup>107</sup>.

Jesus' long monologue in Books 13 – 17 abounds in this kind of rhetoric. In the parable of the true vine, for example, the Nonnian Jesus exhorts his disciples (the metaphorical branches of the vine tree) to 'stay and grow together into one with me' (15.8: μίμνετε συμπεφυῶτες ἐμοί), where the Johannine Jesus simply said 'stay in me' (15.4: μέινετε ἐν ἐμοί). Nonnus' addition of συμπεφυῶτες emphasises the potential for full assimilation and identity between Jesus and his disciples.<sup>108</sup> This participle is strongly reminiscent of the adjective σύμφυτος, which Nonnus uses elsewhere to describe the relationship between the Father and the Son, two separate beings that are, nevertheless, one.<sup>109</sup> It was already fundamental for the ideology of John's Gospel that the blueprint of the Father – Son relationship can be extended to the disciples, and through them to all the Christian faithful. Nonnus' added emphasis on the concepts of imitation and identity (or, imitation leading to

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<sup>107</sup> See Greco (2004) n. on v. 68 with further references, and n. on v. 73 with references to ὁμοούσιος as an equivalent of ἰσοφυῆς. In 5.64 Nonnus' Jesus claims that his deeds are in imitation of those of his Father (ἡθεσιν ἀντιτύποις καὶ ἐγὼ πάις ἔργον ὑφαίνω, ed. Agosti [2003] with n. *ad loc.* on the anti-Arian import of this verse). There is, then, a mimetic chain that leads from the Father through the Son to the disciples. Elsner (2009) 657 points out the significant (and differentiating vis-à-vis the pagan past) role of imitation in Christian sainthood: 'A pagan saint, we might say, is a person who may become a god but in principle need not imitate any other model (except to surpass it), while a Christian saint is always cast as one who imitates, in some form, the one man who was God.' On the command to love framed in terms of imitation in John's Gospel, and how this provides ethical grounding for the martyr's death, see Moss (2010) 49-50.

<sup>108</sup> This extremely rare word is used three times in the space of six verses; see vv. 8, 9, and 13.

<sup>109</sup> See 14.44: σύμφυτός εἰμι τοκῆος, and 17.88: οὐ σε, πάτερ, μάθε κόσμος· ἐγὼ δέ σε σύμφυτος ἔγνων. It is noteworthy that this possibility is open for 'every stable-minded mortal' (15.17: πᾶς βροτὸς ἐμπεδόμητις).

identity) could indicate that he saw in the Gospel's ideology the challenge to create a text that, like the Son, is both different from and the same as the Father. Also, like the disciples (and in particular John),<sup>110</sup> this text performs an exact imitation of its original, and thus becomes an ἀντίτυπον or ἰσοφυῆς μίμημα of the Gospel, equal to it in every way, though still a different text.<sup>111</sup>

While the Latin Christian poets hope that their poetry will guarantee their salvation in the afterlife, Nonnus' poem makes no such claim and indeed tells us nothing about its author and his objectives. This silence seems, at first sight, an aberration considering the strong authorial voice that characterises both Greek and Latin Christian poetry. The *Paraphrase*, however, may, in fact, be serving the same purposes *through* the silence and effacement of its narrator. By 'becoming' John, the poet-narrator of the *Paraphrase* shows that he understood the νοῦς of the Gospel, and stakes a claim for his personal salvation as the disciple who 'becomes' Jesus. Moreover, through this strategy, he allows his reader or performer to follow him in this spiritual journey of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ.

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<sup>110</sup> For another example of this process see 17.65-75, where the Father and Son are said to be σύζυγες, while the disciples are encouraged to become ὁμόζυγες.

<sup>111</sup> Significantly, a lot of Origen's exegetical work aimed to show how the different works of Scripture amount to the same, or, 'shine out one through another in deepening manifestations of the maker's art.' – see McGuckin (2006) 200 with further comments on Origen's impact on Gregory's poetry, which Nonnus knew and imitated. Even more strikingly, Origen's emphasis on typological interpretation led him to proclaim that, for Christians who read spiritually, there is no Old Testament: 'both are New Testament to us'; see *Homily 19 on Numbers* (PG 12.628-9): *Nobis autem, qui eam spiritaliter et evangelico sensu intelligimus et exponimus, semper nova est: et utrumque nobis novum testamentum est, non temporis aetate sed intelligentiae novitate.*

Recent attempts to ‘rehabilitate’ the *Paraphrase* aim to bypass ‘its apparent lack of originality’,<sup>112</sup> and examine how the text resonates within its fifth-century context. This article does not mean to contest such approaches. My argument is, rather, that the ‘lack of originality’ (in that the poem rarely diverges from its *Vorlage*) is itself the most salient feature of this text, and that this is calculated and designed – it is no accident that readers have to remind themselves, and feel forced to affirm, that this text is different from the Gospel and should be seen within its own context. Late Antiquity saw the flourishing of poetic forms such as centos, whose authors strove to create texts identical to, yet paradoxically not the same as the originals from which their verses were culled.<sup>113</sup> The *Paraphrase* is, in this sense, a perfect example of this late antique ‘anachronic’ mentality: like Lactantius’ phoenix at the epigraph of this article, the poem is itself, but it also ‘is’ a different text – its own prior incarnation –, the Gospel.<sup>114</sup> As I have argued, the ventriloquism of John by Nonnus’ narrator makes of this ‘double’ text a deeply spiritual, as well as a literary, exercise.

→ Should have added consideration Erasmus?

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<sup>112</sup> Shorrock (2011) 54.

<sup>113</sup> See Malamud (2012) 163, drawing a connection between cento and Borges’ Pierre Menard; for a connection between Pierre Menard and the *Paraphrase* see Shorrock (2011) 54.

<sup>114</sup> Formisano (2017), esp. 78, aptly observes that Late Antiquity is a supremely ‘anachronic’ period, in which even a historical event as described by Ammianus Marcellinus not only alludes to an analogous incident reported by Herodotus, but ‘is’ that very same event.

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